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WHAT HAPPENED TO LWL?
FROM A TOUR OPERATOR'S POINT OF VIEW

BY

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ABSTRACT

The initial preparation for the exposition was good. The follow-up advertisement did not stimulate the interest from client's perspective. The critical element which killed the fair was the press.

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INTRODUCTION

As a tour operator, our company cannot brag about the great success of its 1984 Louisiana World Exposition (LWL) Tours, if you are counting numbers. On the other hand, if you are judging success by responses from attendees, our tour passengers would all rate New Orleans and its World's Fair with an A+.

While a few tour operators can report a completely successful tour program to Expo '84, in general, most tour operators operated only a small portion of anticipated departures to the Fair. Many cancelled tours in the early months of 1984, when projected supplementary advertising did not appear. Others waited to see what the initial response would be during the opening months of the Fair. A large number of operators continued to operate programs to the Fair although with fewer people per coach than anticipated. Over-all, the Louisiana World Exposition, while excellent in content, was not the success for tour operators that they experienced in 1982 at the Knoxville World's Fair.

On a positive note, the Louisiana World Exposition was everything a World's Fair should be. It was imaginative, informative, colorful, and fanciful. It was spectacular. Every visitor who attended the Fair was enthralled with the architecture, food, pavilions, entertainment, and the festive spirit that permeated the site. That it ended with two million

visitors less than expected and a debt of over 100 million dollars was, at worst, a combination of things. However, nothing but praise should be sung for the people of New Orleans, Louisiana, and LWE who gave the general public everything they promised. They have nothing to be ashamed of when we speak about the quality of the product. The 1984 Louisiana World Exposition was a great production.

PREPARATION

What went wrong, and why? How could something so good turn out so wrong? In my own mind I have narrowed the "whys" down to a few critical things: a major error in marketing strategy, choice of site just two years after another southern U.S. World Exposition, lack of promotional dollars by official sponsors, and news media response.

First, let's talk about marketing. As early as November of 1982, representatives of New Orleans, Louisiana, and the Louisiana World Exposition were getting the word out to tour operators about the upcoming event for 1984. They did an excellent job. In general, tour suppliers (hotels, restaurants, etc.) responded to the event with an attitude of cordial welcome, quality services, and fair treatment.

Tour operators have never had a greater opportunity to be well prepared for an event than they had for the 1984 World Exposition in New Orleans. Hotel rates were kept in line and increases reflected normal raises. The state of Louisiana conducted two educational seminars to instruct the travel industry about how to package, how to price, and how to handle their clients professionally. They also conducted two extremely successful marketplaces, each attended by over 125 motorcoach tour operators. This helped immensely to help familiarize tour operators with the products available in Louisiana. Several major tour organizations held annual meetings in late 1983 or 1984 in New Orleans or nearby locations, coordinating the meetings with familiarization programs to help their members be prepared for the big upcoming event.

Louisiana also supplied tour operators with printed detailed tour escort notes for routings all through the state and even sent staff members to operators offices to train and educate our own personnel on site. The Office of the World Exposition kept operators informed of progress being made on site through an excellent newsletter. Cooperation for tour operators from the World's Fair itself was the best I have ever seen. Promotional materials were readily available, cooperative advertising programs were instituted, and response was quick to any request. In short, never has a state been so unified and organized in preparing tour operators in bringing their clients to an event.

It left us unprepared. Advance preparation to tour operators was so good that we made a major assumption that the entire public was going to be as well courted. Had most of us known that advertising to the general public was not going to start until just a few months before opening, it is a certainty that New Orleans and the state of Louisiana would not have seen the heavy number of bookings it subsequently received for the first weeks of the Fair.

IMPLEMENTATION

The point of no return for most tour operators was 60 days prior to their arrival in New Orleans, when major non-refundable deposits, and decisions whether or not to operate a particular tour departure, were made. That meant that by March 1, 1984, most May departures should be either full or filling in order to operate that tour and not risk losing major deposits in New Orleans. While tour operators should depend on their own means of marketing and advertising to fill their coaches, in a major event such as a World's Fair, supplemental advertising and stimulating of public interest on all levels is all-important. It didn't happen.

In the first days of the Fair, tour operators were promoting alone. No major media campaigns were presented in the early months of 1984. It appeared that in initial planning for the Fair, the motorcoach segment was recognized as being a major importance in getting people to New Orleans, and mid-stream, that decision was reversed. Tour operators felt a certain sense of betrayal at reading in major trade publications that tour operators account for "only" about one-third of the expected attendance at the Louisiana World Exposition and that the general public plans its vacation about six weeks ahead, so their advertising campaign was set to coincide with the individual traveler. It was a bit like being stood up at the altar.

That major marketing mistake was critical not only for tour operators but for the general public and individual travelers as well. For a special event, people do not walk in off the streets. They plan their vacations well in advance. Whether traveling individually or with a group, each person shares the same concerns about space availability, costs, weather, traffic congestion, people congestion, and eating . . . and they make their plans early.

Another factor in low attendance could possibly be location and timing. Many people simply weren't interested in another World's Fair. Both fairs were drawing their major number of attendees from the same basic area. While there was much criticism of hosting the 1983 Fair in a relatively small city the rest of the world had never heard of, it appears that having a World's Fair in one of the nation's most flavorful and unique cities did not have the appeal needed for the event. Some of the biggest successes in the world and some of the greatest disasters have been a result of lucky or unlucky timing. It appears to me that the same place at another time or, another area of the country in 1984, would have made the Fair imminently more successful.

In addition to the lack of advertising by LWE, it seemed through the course of the year that we did not see as much supplemental advertising usually connected with those chosen as "official" World's Fair sponsors. Advertising commitment from official sponsors should be a major part of being selected as an official sponsor. That commitment, in order to get the word to the traveling public, should be not only in use of the logo on their own products but in the form of supplemental advertising through various media.

Everything mentioned thus far in the "what happened" department has a rational explanation and can be added to the list of "what not to do next time." The one major factor that cannot be planned . . . and rightfully so is the response of the news media to an event of any type.

In this instance, however, it is my opinion that the news media, in general, was irresponsible by failing to report the entire picture. Instead, they focused on all the negatives: LWE's financial problems, the dangers of a big city at night, etc. They went from an initial "no response" attitude to a negative attitude response without stopping to really see what was before their eyes. They missed so many wonderful opportunities with this Fair for human interest stories, food stories, pages and pages of home and entertainment sections, educational and international stories, and on and on. Had the press focused on the total picture, the American public would have embraced a much different perspective of this Fair.

CONCLUSION

It seems from this event we have learned two major things. One, that even a great success can be a big failure. And two, that the success of a tour operator's planned program to a special event lies not only in the good planning on his (or her) own part and the cooperation received from tour suppliers, but also on two most important factors: timely marketing strategies to reach the public, and conscientious reporting by the news media.

Louisiana, you have nothing to be ashamed of. You put on a good show!